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AUTHOR Trachtman, Gilbert M.
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ABSTRACT

In this volatile era of economic retrenchment, corporate downsizing, and government budget crises, school psychologists' major defense must be short-term political action and grassroots support, but their long-term strategy must be to build a position of importance for school psychologists in the school. In the long run this will not be accomplished by legal mandates for services, but must lie in the eyes of the beholders whose voices will matter--the teachers and the parents psychologists should be serving in the best interest of children. While state and national leadership strive to convince legislators of school psychology's value, the ultimate importance of school psychologists in the educational enterprise will be determined by the activities, or lack of activity, of each school psychologist in the field. Ultimately, the responsibility for empowering the profession and making school psychologists more important may lie with training programs, which must assume the responsibility for producing a generation of young school psychologists able to deliver a wide range of useful services, but also ready to play an activist role. (JBJ)

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Chapter Two

Indispensability: The Holy Grail

Gilbert M. Trachtman

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The Mission: Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to contribute a brief chapter on how psychologists can work to make psychologists in schools indispensable.

The Process: Weeks of rumination, sifting through previous papers I've written for golden kernels of truth. Searching for answers in papers by esteemed colleagues. Listening to my students sharing externship and internship experiences with their fellows, hoping for a new insight to emerge from their energetic processing. And, finally, acknowledging the futility of the quest.

The Conclusion: Mission impossible.

As a young parent with limited budget, many years ago, I needed to sort my priorities most carefully. At that time, it was clear to me that only food, minimal clothing and shelter were indispensable. Our need list was small; our want list much bigger. As our economic circumstances improved some of our wants became needs. Eventually, it was difficult to remember—but important to do so—that there had been a time when something to eat, something to wear, and someplace to live had been the only indispensables.

In a contemporary world where, frighteningly, even a place to live and something to eat are beyond the means of so many, the goal of indispensability for psychologists in schools seems a futile quest, indeed. Certainly, were I the administrator of a school system with an adequate budget I would employ a considerable number of psychologists to perform many wondrous activities both within the schools and collaboratively with the parent community and with other community agencies. Conversely, as my available funds diminished more and more, I would be hard put to favor psychologists over those who teach the children, those who transport them or feed them, those who maintain the buildings and grounds. And if, after those needs were met, I had a few additional dollars to spend, I'm not really sure how I would choose between maintaining a gym, a science lab, a library, a music or art room, a uniformed marching band or a school nurse, guidance counselor, or psychologist.

And so I suggest an alternate mission for consideration: how can psychologists work to increase the relative importance with which psychologists are perceived in the school community? While we may never attain indispensability, can we become more valuable?

We are currently entrapped in a crazy era. Despite a seemingly robust stock market and an apparently healthy economy only a few seem to benefit. The rest of us live with economic retrenchment; corporate downsizing; fear of unemployment; city/state/federal budget crises;

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funding cuts in most areas of human service; and legislatures at all levels in a mean-spirited mood, hostile to children, to the aged, to immigrants, to the infirm, the unemployed, the homeless. We see AIDS prevention programs slashed and military budgets puffed up, and public assaults on hard-won rights for gays and lesbians, freedom of reproductive choice, environmental protection, and civil rights.

We are also entrapped within special education. Many of us expressed concern, years ago, that while the number of school psychologists was growing exponentially as a result of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (reauthorized in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), we were simultaneously losing sight of the broader roles we should be playing in regular education as we became the special education gatekeepers. And while some of us contributed significantly to special education in more constructive consultation and intervention roles, most of us were soon perceived as assessment/classification personnel. And now, entrapped in narrow roles and entrapped in an era where the cost of special education is increasingly challenged and assessment and classification increasingly in disfavor, many school psychologists fear for their jobs.

In this volatile era, our major defense must be short-term political action and we must support our leaders at every level as they attempt to influence legislation and call upon us for grassroots support. But we also need to consider how we can strengthen our position in the schools more organically over time.

The need for school psychologists to take on different roles has been a constant refrain in our literature. Thus, I called for "new directions" 35 years ago (Trachtman, 1961) in a paper offering many ideas I would still support and some I have since outgrown, but I failed to provide a blueprint for achieving my recommended reforms. Twenty-five years later a self-described "fantastical futurist" (Alpert, 1985) urged major "change" in our roles, but again without a blueprint for implementation. Many others, in between and since, have offered thoughtful, often provocative scenarios for school psychology.

In the 40 years elapsed since I was a practitioner, our knowledge base has exploded and exciting new techniques and approaches for service delivery have been developed. Among the myriad examples which could be cited are two which are most concordant with the ideas I am about to suggest: working collaboratively with teachers (Rosenfield, 1987) and working collaboratively with parents and families (Christenson & Conoley, 1993). Our literature regularly informs us of innovative, proactive programs of service delivery initiated or conducted by school psychologists. Clearly, we can assemble convincing evidence of our potential value to schools anywhere, and of the actual value we have demonstrated in some places. And yet current data informs us that school psychologists generally remain fixed in an assessment/placement, special-education focused model, and there are many indications that neither teachers nor parents particularly treasure our contributions.

Forty years ago, as a working school psychologist, I watched as the economy turned sour and as we moved into a period of financial crisis and political conservatism. In a wave of so-called tax revolts, local communities rejected school budgets. School administrators resubmitted greatly reduced budget proposals or adopted legally circumscribed austerity budgets, and staff reductions of one sort or another became the norm. In our district, a board of education proposal to reduce psychological services by 40% evoked several spontaneous passionate statements of opposition from parents claiming to have benefited greatly from the assistance of one or another psychologist and other parents in the audience added applause and murmurs of approval. The

proposed cuts were withdrawn. As our staff continued to work, some of us found principals asking that additional days of psychological service be assigned to their school for the next year, citing requests from teachers who found us helpful and supportive. During those years of financial stress, many school districts reduced psychological services, but some did not, and a few actually expanded. The difference was parent and teacher input.

Crazy times are not forever. When some sense of rationality and normalcy returns, even with inevitable economic upturns and downturns, the future of school psychology will be very much a function of our value to teachers and parents. So, while our short term strategy today must be political activity at the legislative level, our long term strategy must be to build a position of importance for ourselves in the school. I suggest that, in the long run, this will not be accomplished by legal mandates for our services, which can be unmandated as easily as they are mandated. Our importance must lie in the eyes of the beholders whose voices will matter—the teachers and the parents we should be serving in the best interests of children.

Our state and national leadership strive mightily to convince legislators of our value, citing the knowledge base and the skills and techniques and programs our profession has developed. Their efforts are crucial in fighting against crippling legislation or regulations, in opposing budget cuts, and in supporting new legislation beneficial to children. When they attempt to mobilize the rank and file to support their efforts with letter writing or phone calls or visits to our legislators, too many of us fail to respond. And many of us who do respond are then content that we have done our bit on behalf of school psychology, while we may be content to function in a narrow and restrictive manner, doing little on our immediate job to push for change of any sort and depending on our leadership to effect change on our behalf.

But ultimately the importance of school psychologists in the educational enterprise will be determined by the activities (or lack of activity) of each school psychologist in the field, school by school, building by building, community by community.

Many school psychologists today work closely and collaboratively with parents and teachers, as a valued member of the educational team and a key figure in home-school collaborative efforts. These psychologists see teachers as colleagues and parents as their client. In addition to earning the trust of parents and developing working alliances with them, they frequently play a significant role in facilitating improved parent-teacher relationships. They represent the strength of our profession today, identifiable in numerous schools across the country.

Unfortunately, too many others fall short of this ideal. Some may passively accept restrictive job descriptions and may function narrowly as psychometricians or classification technicians. As such, they are invisible to most parents and are seen by teachers as the person who can help remove an unwanted child from the classroom. Some may be unhappy with such restrictive roles, but may lack the assertiveness to push for broader roles or may lack the skill to effect such change. (And, of course, some may possess both the will and the skill but may fail to succeed in particularly intractable circumstances). Others may be fortunate to have broader responsibilities but may not possess the requisite attitudes to succeed. Most teachers would value a truly collegial relationship with a helpful psychologist and many parents would value collaborative interaction, but teachers will be unappreciative of psychologists who pontificate prescriptively as the sole expert and parents will be defensive and unresponsive to home-school collaboration when they perceive school staff as patronizing and unempathic. All the individuals described above represent the vulnerability of our profession, easily subject to

cutbacks, and replacement by outside contracting or by less expensive, lesser trained staff.

As I visit many schools and speak to many school psychologists in the field, I am constantly disturbed by how many are unaware of major educational issues—uninformed about federal education reform legislation such as Goals 2000 or about their own state initiatives (e.g., *Compact for Learning* in New York). Even more unsettling is the extent to which many psychologists are uninformed about and uninvolved in local reform initiatives in their own building, who do not see any potential role for themselves in these endeavors, and who are unaware of how peripheral to the life of the school they must seem to the very administrators and teachers with whom they may discuss individual children from time to time.

It is unlikely that exhortation or professional position papers will be successful in moving these individuals to significant change. The answer, if there is one, may lie with a new generation of school psychologists, and the responsibility for effecting this change may lie with today's training programs. Perhaps, while we have successfully taught our students many useful skills, we have fallen short in other ways.

Hundreds of students graduate each year from school psychology programs, trained well and prepared to offer services many will never deliver. Many will, indeed, perform the roles for which they were trained, but many, many more will spend most of their time mired in a traditional assessment role expected of them by their employers.

Those who have no vision, who lack assertiveness, or who are unskilled at activism are doomed to spend their professional life in the role defined by their agency. Those who have a vision, sufficient assertiveness, and competency to push for change may fail at changing their role, but at least have the chance to succeed. There is every reason to believe that, with sufficient purpose, drive and skill, individual practitioners can demonstrate substantial success in modifying their role (Carner,1982). If the national image of school psychology is still, depressingly, often a gatekeeper/standardized test administrator percept, any hope for changing this image must comefrom the proactive efforts of people in the ranks.

And so, ultimately, the responsibility for empowering our profession, for making school psychologists more important, if not indispensable, may lie with our training programs, which must assume the responsibility for producing a generation of young school psychologists able to deliver a wide range of useful services, but also ready to play an activist role. Learning how to be an activist is not difficult (Trachtman, 1990). *Wanting* to be an activist is the key.

We trainers must consider how to infuse our students with the ego strength, the motivation, the caring, the drive, and the competence to enter schools proactively. And if, as trainers, we are unable to learn the secret of how to teach these attributes, we should screen applicants more selectively and accept into our programs those who already possess the elements from which advocacy and activism emerge, and then we need to support and reinforce activist tendencies and potential within our programs.

School psychologists must be prepared to do the job for which they have been hired, however narrowly defined, to do it competently, and to earn the respect and trust of their colleagues and their supervisors, while never losing sight of the broader roles to which they aspire. They must see themselves as an integral part of the school community and must resist the outsider role into which they are frequently cast. They must be prepared to devote considerable energy, wisely directed, in slowly teaching parents, teaching teachers, and teaching administrators how much more of a contribution they can offer. If most young school psychologists began their career with this sense of mission, despite the rigidity and inflexibility of some systems, despite the inevitable

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failure some will experience, many would accomplish significant breakthroughs ultimately leading, summatively, to our greater importance in the schools.

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